

BORDERLINES

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Rebecca Morris's paintings make spatial relations meaningful. Shapes and colors encroach, overlap, obstruct, contrast, compliment, and puzzle together in a shuffle that settles in resolute cohesion. A feeling of motion just contained, of a jostle briefly lulled, lends these paintings their resounding sense of openness. Morris's decades-long dealings with abstraction have hinged on close attention to borders and boundaries. It's these edges and separating lines that drive her vibrant compositions. One could trace the evolution of her oeuvre over two decades—via material experimentation, development of framing devices, and perennial return to the grid, for instance—as an ongoing investigation of what it means to divide and segment the canvas, of how that might play out. This enduring curiosity is also a way of both doubling down and toying with the basic condition of a painting: it contains. In this essay, I'll consider how Morris's boundary zones operate in a handful of paintings, touching on the way in which these framing devices subtly destabilize hierarchies and draw on the role of ornament as integral to histories of abstraction.

Morris outlines many of her paintings with a textured silver or gold line. She employed this technique for the first time in *Untitled (#09-05)* (2005; p. 177), in which a gilded edge cinches a vaporous field of speckled pinks and grayish smudges. Despite the subtlety of the intervention relative to the painting's large scale, its effect is significant as the border presses back on the airy painting, as if to condense it. The tension between the framing device and the painting's atmospheric plane is enacted by adroit material contrast between opaque and coagulated texture on the one hand and thinly applied, translucent paint on the other. This device was something of a breakthrough that Morris has continued to return to and develop since then, tapping into a way of harnessing a power that is variously soft, assertive, and encompassing. In the recent *Untitled (01-22)* (2022; p. 45), a wavering silver border traces the large red painting's top and bottom edge, while its sides are lined with a precise band that also extends across the canvas to divide it into a six-celled grid. By applying silver spray paint on top of a layer of oil, Morris derives a viscous quality from the material as it corrugates in textured tributaries. This congealed solidity stands counter to spray paint's usual airiness, cultivating a kind of friction by using the material against itself.

These vaguely impasto, adorned edges are also, of course, reminiscent of an engraved metal frame. By integrating a framing device into the picture plane, Morris unsettles the implicit hierarchy between image and frame, as the latter is no longer a secondary addition, but rather part of the painting itself. As these silver and gold borders nod explicitly to a tradition of ornate frames, they engage questions of ornamentation more broadly as well. Significantly, the Medieval origins of the ornament as a concept or aesthetic proposition constituted something integral to a whole, as art historian Ananda K. Coomaraswamy elucidates, it referred “not to anything that could be added to an already finished and effective product merely to please the eye or ear, but to the completion of anything with whatever might be necessary to its functioning.”¹ We can extend the logic by which “a sword would ‘ornament’ a knight, as virtue ‘ornaments’ the soul,” to understand how Morris ornaments her paintings not in a final flourish, but in a key compositional tool.² This gesture is part of her multiform delight in decoration, coupled with a subtle critique of its diminishment historically.

Rebecca Morris's paintings are tacit reminders of how a range of forms of ornamentation, from calligraphy to quilting, constituted incipient instances of abstraction in (alternative) histories of the non-representational that stretch far beyond the early 20th century. One way that she engages this affinity is by both defying and doubling down on the properties of the pattern. The checkerboard paintings are a particularly relevant example given our focus on boundaries, as their structure is determined by alternating squares that repeatedly assert their territory in contrasting color to the blocks surrounding them. Take *Untitled (#12-20)* (2020; p. 73): Enclosed by a thin, gold line, the painting homes in on repetition—a key aspect of pattern— as the square shape of the canvas reiterates the recurring squares that it contains. Within some of these squares, wide, hot pink, horizontal and vertical slashes assemble square-like forms, but these brushstrokes grow increasingly erratic in overlapping marks that shift between pale and saturated tones—melding seriality and spontaneity, and reveling in and resisting the pattern. Meanwhile the other squares in a rustier pink have a

dappled quality, reminiscent of the blurring effect of moiré. The checkerboard evokes a gamesmanship, which is an ethos central to Morris's painting process as each move—each mark—challenges, guides, redirects the next. She employs recurrent strategies and shapes but avoids the premeditated in a palpable sense of intuitive agility. The checkerboard also constitutes a playful take on the grid—that hallmark of modernism and fixture of Morris's practice. There's a riffing and a renewal inherent in rehashing the grid as a pink, board game-like pattern. Morris draws out the deviance that is latent in the grid as a regulating structure, present from the tremor of Agnes Martin (1912–2004)'s pencil to Ad Reinhardt (1913–1967)'s infinitesimally shifting blocks of color, like the exception that clings tightly to any rule. See the wobbling white spray paint like a netting against black stains of oil in *Untitled (#04-01)* (2001; p. 183) or the cartographic diversions of the gold spray painted grid that fixes the amorphous frenzy of deep brown lines in *Untitled (#19-20)* (2020; p. 69). She stretches its capacity as a compositional tool by both leveraging and destabilizing its role as a controlled framework.

Morris insists on the margin: a formal stance with political implications, in a reverberation like her ongoing probing at hierarchies. This is something that can't be spelled out. It is felt instead in the artist's attention to these edge zones. In their weightiness. The thick outer peripheries in paintings like *Untitled (#12-13)* (2013; p. 139) and *Untitled (#04-20)* (2020; p. 77) becomes a margin-like space that becomes something beyond a framing device. It's worth noting that just as her edges are never hard, these forms of boundaries in Morris's work are far from distinct categories. My aim is not to delineate between them, but rather to emphasize the significance of the act of delineating itself in her work. Indeed, these approaches to composition often interact within a single canvas, as in *Untitled (#11-18)* (2018; p. 89), where a stack of horizontal stripes in varying widths and patterns—a black and white checkerboard, brown striated sediment, clustered amoebas in light-washed orange—are bound by a thin, candy cane striped line. Set as if atop a deep black monochrome, this vertical rectangle loosely resembles text on a page. This black section manages to both temper and accentuate the painting's tightly choreographed tension between cacophony and control. This black expanse becomes void-like and lends the action at its center a floating quality. *Untitled (#04-20)* (2020; p. 77) is a similar composition on nearly the same canvas with the outer section in layers of almost-muddled, discernible brushstrokes in pale pink with a smattering of bright pink dabs. These clear traces of the hand and the scattered darker marks are evocative of a kind of marginalia—a commentary on a symbiotic relationship with the vibrant puzzle of shapes at its center. Writing about Rebecca Morris's work can aspire to be at best such marginalia, as another boundary latent in her work is a buffer to language and its proclivity to pin things down. While her iconic "Manifesto (For Abstractionists and Friends of the Non-Objective)" (2004) is a testament to her own way with words in an incisive celebration of abstraction, she has long steered clear of titles and employs a numerical cataloging system instead. I imagine this stance in Morris's oeuvre to be more generous than the hostility that Rosalind Krauss assigned to the grid and its "will to silence."³ Unlike the barrier to narrative or discourse that Krauss outlined in her canonical 1979 essay, the ineffable quality of Rebecca Morris's paintings is a capaciousness—an ability to both contain and to keep things open. Enough said.

¹ Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, "The Nature of Medieval Art," *Studies in Comparative Religion*, vol. 15, no. 1-2 (Winter-Spring 1983); reprinted in *The Essential Ananda K. Coomaraswamy*, Rama P. Coomaraswamy, ed. (Bloomington, In.: World Wisdom, 2004), 74

² Ibid

³ Rosalind Krauss. "Grids," *October*, vol. 9 (Summer 1979), 50.